

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Rocky Mount Mills

Overview

Students will consider the impact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had on Rocky Mount Mills, where the workforce changed from predominantly white to including 25% African American employees within the following decade. Using primary sources, including interview excerpts with Rocky Mount citizens, students will explore the period of integration as it relates to the Mills.

Grades

Middle & high school

Materials

- Copy of United Merchants Letter, attached
- Rocky Mount Mills During Integration, worksheet attached
- Ability to play video (i.e., projector and speakers for entire class or individual laptops and headphones if students work independently)
- Closing Stories (8 minute video), available at <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/community-narratives/closing-stories/>
- Additional information on Integration at Rocky Mount Mills: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/integration/>

Duration

30+ minutes

Procedure

Primary Source Examination: A Letter to Rocky Mount Mills from United Merchants

1. Provide students with the attached primary source document, a letter from United Merchants. Individually or in partners, have students read and review the letter then discuss:
 - What first strikes you or stands out to you about this letter? (Note any observations that you find interesting or think may be important.)
 - What is the purpose of this letter?
 - What is the date of the letter? What was taking place during this time that might have impacted this letter being sent?
 - Based on this letter and/or what you already know about the late 1960s, what inferences can you make about life during the time period in which it was written?
 - What do you already know about the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 & Experiences at Rocky Mount Mills

2. Bring the class back together to discuss their thoughts regarding the letter and the questions above, then further share:

“Mill work in Southern textile mills was out of reach for many African Americans as white employees dominated the workforce. That is until 1964. The [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) mandated the integration of mill workforces across the United States. It banned segregation of public spaces and employment discrimination. Title VII of the act prohibited (and still prohibits) employers of 15 or more staff members from discriminating against prospective and current employees based on race, sex, color, nationality, or religion. Consequently, black employment soared in the 1960s and 70s. After this legislation, mills saw an influx of black workers until they became the dominant mill demographic by the 1990s and 2000s.

As a government sub-contractor, Rocky Mount Mills was required to submit a Certification of Non-segregated Facilities by May 9, 1967 on the Order of Elimination of Segregated Facilities by the Secretary of Labor (1967) in order to remain considered for federal contracts. [This is] a letter from United Merchants and Manufacturers Inc., once one of the largest companies in the garment industry, to Rocky Mount Mills requesting for the second time to supply their certification. United Merchants and Manufacturers, as a government contractor, was required to have a certification from each of their sub-contractors before each could be awarded a contract exceeding \$10,000." (Source: [Rocky Mount Mills Integration](#))

3. Hand out the attached worksheet "Rocky Mount Mills During Integration" and tell students that they are going to watch an 8 minute video on Rocky Mount Mills, "[Closing Stories](#)," which will provide some information regarding the transformation of the Rocky Mount Mills workforce that took place after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After viewing, allow students to share their observations for questions 1 and 2 on the sheet and further discuss:
 - What transformation took place in the textile industry in the 1960s and what led to this change?
 - How did the Civil Rights Act of 1964 have an immediate impact on Rocky Mount Mills? (The first black worker on the production floor started at Rocky Mount Mills in 1965; within the next decade, the black labor force grew to 25%.)
 - What do you think Annette Tyson Xavier meant when she said she wanted people to "appreciate" Rocky Mount Mills for "what it for what it was?" She goes on to say that it was not "all it could have been." What do you think she means?
 - What sense to you get of what it meant to the African American community to be employed at Rocky Mount Mills? Mrs. Xavier notes that while workers weren't highly paid, they were provided "economic stability." Do you think the same is true for comparable jobs in today's society? Why or why not?
 - What impact do you think the closing of RMM had on the community?
 - What do you think Mrs. Xavier means when she says she thinks it's important to show the "pride of the black community" and not just the "depression?"
4. Tell students that they will continue exploring the period of integration as it relates to Rocky Mount Mills by completing the worksheet, which will share additional information as well as allow students to hear a few voices with first-hand knowledge of this period. (Students can either work on this individually or in partners/small groups, or if multiple laptops are unavailable then the teacher can also play the oral history clips for the entire class.) Once students have completed the worksheet, discuss their responses as a class.

Impacts & Effects of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

5. Close with a focus on the "Culminating Thoughts" question (#8 on the worksheet) and facilitate further exploration of the short-term and long-term impacts and effects of the Civil Rights Act on Rocky Mount citizens. Ensure students understand that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination and segregation on the basis of race, religion, national origin and gender in the workplace, schools, public accommodations and in federally assisted programs. It also banned unequal application of voter registration requirements and paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned discriminatory literacy tests and offered other protections. The Act also called general attention to the racial injustices African-Americans had faced around the country. However, long-term many civil rights activists say much remains to be done to ensure equality for all. There are still issues around the country, from voting access and to inequalities in the criminal justice system.

6. As students continue to consider impacts and effects, teachers can optionally provide a culminating activity assignment:
 - Imagine you are a local leader who has been invited to speak this July 2 at a commemoration event of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Using your initial thoughts, considerations from our discussion, and further research, write a short speech that addresses the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in terms of its short and long-term impacts and effects. What improved? What still needs work?
7. Teachers can make this a short writing activity (sample rubric for a written speech is available [here](#)) or can make this a more extensive activity and have students present their speeches either in small groups or to the whole class. (A sample rubric for speech presentations is available [here](#).)

UNITED MERCHANTS

1407 BROADWAY • NEW YORK, N.Y. 10018 • TEL. 212-LO 4-6000

December 31, 1968

SECOND REQUEST

Rocky Mt. Mills
Rocky Mount, North Carolina

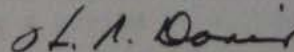
Dear Sir:

By order of the Secretary of Labor dated 9 May 1967 each Government contractor is required to obtain a Certification of Nonsegregated Facilities from each of its subcontractors prior to award of a non-exempt subcontract exceeding \$10,000. This is a certification that the subcontractors will not provide segregated facilities for its employees, also the employees will not be allowed to perform their services at any location where segregated facilities are maintained. Regulation establishes the form of the certification and the certification must be renewed annually.

As you are one of the suppliers on our active list, it will be necessary that we have a current certification from you in our file. To permit us to place business more promptly, we are enclosing a copy of the Certification of Nonsegregated Facilities. It is requested that the certification be executed by a duly authorized individual of your company and promptly returned to the attention of the undersigned.

Very truly yours,

UNITED MERCHANTS AND MANUFACTURERS, Inc.



H. R. Davis
Comptroller

hrd/hc

UNITED MERCHANTS AND MANUFACTURERS, INC.

Name: _____

Rocky Mount Mills During Integration

1. Note anything that stands out to you while watching the 8 minute video "[Closing Stories](#)" (words, phrases, observations that you find interesting or surprising, etc.)

2. What was the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and how did it impact Rocky Mount Mills?

John Mebane, the mill's last president, recollected that the mill underwent a significant transition in its workforce over time in the second half of the 20th century, going from majority-white to majority-black by the time it closed in 1996. However, **how did this transition play out?** Some mills' journeys to an integrated workforce were bumpy; others complied with relative lack of drama.

3. Listen to a short part of an interview with [Linda Daniels and Helen Alston](#), who worked at Rocky Mount Mills in the 1970s. How do these women describe working at RMM? How do they seem to feel about their time there and why do you think this was the case?

4. How do their comments compare to what [Annette Tyson Xavier](#) shared in the "[Closing Stories](#)" video?

5. Next, listen to an excerpt from an interview with [Herbert Tillman](#) who worked in Burlington Mills during the 1960s and discusses African American employment in Rocky Mount during this time. (Play from 1:13:44–1:21:35.) What injustices does he note? How does his experience at Burlington Mills differ from the other interview excerpts you've heard?

Later in the interview, Mr. Tillman discusses leaving to work at Abbott Laboratories, describing an occasion where his maintenance supervisor tore up his application for a higher level job, assuming he was not qualified for it. It turns out, he was the most qualified person who had applied. Such instances of racial stereotyping and professional obstruction were not uncommon, as various local and national court cases demonstrate. (For instance, In [Lea v. Cone Mills](#) (1969), three African American women successfully argued that Cone Mills at its Eno Plant denied employment to black women.)

Although textile mills across the South integrated after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, spurring a huge demographic shift in the industry in the second half of the 20th century, the sad irony is that US textiles became an industry in crisis, as the closing of Rocky Mount Mills attests. Cheaper foreign imports, resulting from various free trade agreements, replaced domestic products, leading to the closure of one mill after another during the past two to three decades.

6. Return to the interview with [Linda Daniels and Helen Alston](#). How did Ms. Daniels and Ms. Alston feel about the closing of RMM? How does this echo the sentiments of Ms. Xavier?

7. What impact do you think the closing of RMM had on the community?

These closures meant loss of jobs and economic decline for whole communities, such as Winnsboro, SC, Danville, VA, Rocky Mount, NC, and many others where textile was a major industry. For most of these communities, they have yet to recover and witnessed the old mills being demolished.

Fortunately, some mills have been saved and are being redeveloped for other purposes. American Tobacco, Loray Mill, Revolution Mill, Rocky Mount Mills, Carr Mill, Saxapahaw Rivermill, and Trenton Mill are just a few examples of mills in North Carolina seeing new repurposed lives. It is the hope that these reused sites will spur community and/or economic development like the American Tobacco Campus did for downtown Durham.

Source: <https://rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/narrative/integration/>

8. **Culminating Thoughts:** Considering what you have learned about the Civil Rights Act of 1964, what were some of the short-term and long-term effects of this law on Rocky Mount citizens?